

## Turkey and Russia: no birds of the same feather

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# SWP Comment

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## Turkey and Russia: No Birds of the Same Feather

*Dimitar Bechev and Suat Kınıklioğlu*

Since Turkey's controversial acquisition of the S-400 missile system from Russia, the narrative that the EU is facing a twin challenge from the East has been gaining currency in European capitals. Turkey and Russia are often portrayed as two authoritarian regimes led by strong leaders who favour an omnipotent state at the expense of fundamental freedoms and liberal democratic institutions. Yet, putting these two countries into the same basket and formulating policies accordingly is problematic. The EU has separate sets of relations with Russia and Turkey. Ankara remains part of NATO and the EU's Customs Union. That said, Turkey is quickly approaching a critical crossroad on its turbulent political journey: The country will either consolidate its authoritarian regime or return to democracy. The EU has a high stake in this matter, and thus it needs to take a proactive stance in favour of pro-democracy forces.

On 17 February 2020, a court in Istanbul acquitted prominent philanthropist Osman Kavala, who was accused of attempting to overthrow the Turkish government by organising the 2013 Gezi protests. But the joy of those who welcomed the release proved short-lived. Kavala was promptly taken back into custody, this time on charges of espionage and links to the failed coup in 2016.

Days before, on 11 February, magistrates in the Russian town of Penza sentenced seven young left-wing activists to 6 to 18 years in prison. Their crime? Plotting terrorist attacks during the 2018 presidential election and the World Cup. Many observers likened the so-called Network (*Set'*) case to Stalin's show trials. Rather than deliver

justice, the court's mission appeared to be stamping out dissent.

These two stories lay bare the unnerving similarities between Turkey and Russia. In 2018, the international watchdog Freedom House downgraded Turkey from "partly free" to "not free". Russia was demoted back in 2004, at the end of Putin's first term. Constitutional changes in Turkey, in force since 2018, transferred all essential powers to President Erdoğan. Checks on the executive branch, from the media all the way to parliament, have been dismantled. In Russia, Putin has amended the constitution so as to be eligible to rule for another two six-year terms after 2024. Expectations that he might cede power, step by step, to a successor have evaporated.

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Comparing Erdoğan and Putin is nothing new. Their core messages converge: first, that strong leadership is essential for bettering ordinary citizens' lives, delivering economic growth, and ensuring stability; second, that the Motherland, whether Russia or Turkey, is under threat from "foreign" – read Western – and "domestic enemies" sowing disunity to prevent its rise in the international arena. The Kremlin propaganda machine blew this argument out of proportion after Putin's 2012 return to the presidency, and especially with the seizure of Crimea and the war in Ukraine. Erdoğan, too, has been rallying the public behind the flag for years: holding mass rallies during the *Mavi Marmara* crisis, which aimed at breaking Israel's embargo on Gaza in 2010, labelling Gezi Park protests a foreign conspiracy, blaming the US for the 2016 coup attempt, and intervening in Syria to fight the outlawed PKK. For both of them, rallying the public behind the flag, with help from loyalist media, became the strategy of choice.

Putin and Erdoğan have turned into a diplomatic double act, with the recent agreement for a ceasefire in Idlib being the latest example. Both espouse a vision of a multipolar world free of US hegemony. Rather than an outpost of NATO or an eternal EU membership candidate, Turkey sees itself as an autonomous power whose writ runs from Libya to Syria and from Sudan to the Gulf. Ties with influential global players such as Russia and China are, according to Erdoğan and his circle, essential to the national interest. Likewise, Russia considers Turkey a partner, even though their policies may be at odds, as in Syria and Libya. Putin and Erdoğan have managed to keep conflicts under a lid and maximise overlapping interests.

Yet, Turkey is, and will remain, different from Russia. It has a relatively more competitive political system shaped by decades of democratic development. The strength of the opposition, the structure of the economy, and the nature of linkages to the West make it unlikely that Turkey will consolidate an authoritarian system resembling

Russia's. Ankara is not coming into Moscow's geopolitical orbit either. It still has a strong interest in maintaining links with the EU and the US instead of membership in a league of autocrats. What Erdoğan does – similar to his role model Sultan Abdulhamid II – is play Russia against the West, and vice versa, in pursuit of maximum strategic autonomy.

## The Russian "Model"

Russia has almost no democratic record. It was only in 1906 that the Tsarist Empire adopted a constitution and had its first legislative elections. However, the Bolshevik takeover in 1917 put an end to gradual liberalisation. Political pluralism resurfaced only during *perestroika* of the 80s and in the early 90s with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the birth of the Russian Federation opening new opportunities. Yet, democratisation faltered at two critical junctures. In 1993, President Boris Yeltsin used the armed forces to storm and dissolve the opposition-run legislature. Russia adopted a new constitution that enhanced the role of the executive. Then, in the 1996 presidential elections, large-scale manipulation prevented the transfer of power to Gennady Zyuganov, the leader of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. Political rights and civil freedoms thrived as never before in the 90s, yet the presidency dominated other branches of government, with Yeltsin being dependent on oligarchs and special interests.

In the 2000s, Putin changed the rules, becoming an indispensable arbiter for clans in government: e.g. oligarchs, the *siloviki* (security elite), and civilian technocrats. Opposition parties were co-opted by the Kremlin while opponents, such as oligarchs Boris Berezovsky and Mikhail Khodorkovsky, had their business empires destroyed and assets redistributed to pro-regime tycoons. Rapid growth fuelled by high oil prices made Putin's rule popular. Unlike post-communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe as well as Turkey, elections and democratic

institutions turned into a façade, though civil society and, to a lesser degree, media freedoms were not curtailed.

Putin's third term as president (2012–8) saw Russia drifting further into authoritarianism. From an arbiter, he morphed into a quasi-monarchical figure. Faced with civic protests in 2011–2, the regime grew more repressive. Putin sought to bolster his ratings through assertive foreign policy, opposition to the West, and the appeal to nationalism.

Over the past years, economic stagnation, anti-elite sentiment, and traditionally low levels of trust in public institutions have eroded the regime's legitimacy. Though Putin's regime is resilient, constitutional amendments do show it is concerned about its long-term survival. COVID-19 has put on display its inefficiency and vulnerability. Putin fails to inspire much enthusiasm, but a majority of citizens see no credible alternative.

## Turkey's Brand of Competitive Authoritarianism

Turkey has followed a rather different historical trajectory. It opened up its political system, abolishing one-party rule after the Second World War. For decades, parties of various ideological stripes have vied for votes in competitive elections, bargained, and entered into coalitions to share spoils and governance responsibilities. Turkey became exposed to Western liberal norms thanks to NATO and association with the European Economic Community. That said, all the way until the mid-2000s, the military limited elected politicians' authority by intervening in decision-making and staging periodic coups. Still, military tutelage allowed for free and sufficiently fair elections, a robust media, and civil society.

The rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) proved to be a game changer. Electoral success propelled Erdoğan to power and ultimately enabled him to eliminate constraints to his rule. The military was defanged thanks to EU-led reforms and, later on, through a series of highly contro-

versial trials. The 2010 referendum diluted the judiciary's autonomy. The clash with the Gülen movement — accused of fomenting the July 2016 coup — and the ensuing purges completed the takeover of state bureaucracy. Targeted repression tamed the opposition and civil society. AKP-friendly businesses gradually took ownership of major media. The constitutional changes of 2017 handed all power to Erdoğan, substantially downgrading the Grand National Assembly, the ultimate check on executive authority.

Still, Turkey has not transitioned to a full-fledged autocracy.

In contrast to Russia, Turkish *elections are contested* and, as the 2019 local polls demonstrated, the opposition has a chance to win. In Moscow's city elections last September, Navalny's candidates were banned from running. Turkey is relatively new to electoral fraud. Although there were improprieties in the Ankara election in 2014, the overall validity of the vote was only seriously questioned in the constitutional referendum of April 2017.

*Opposition parties* (CHP, HDP, and the Iyi Party) are relatively strong in Turkey, despite suppression. They have access to resources, experience of governance at the local and, historically, national levels, and robust links to their relative electorate, which turns out *en masse* at the ballot box. That is not the case in Russia, where only communists have similar reach, yet are co-opted by the Kremlin. The Turkish opposition has adapted and learnt to compete under the presidential regime: coordinating electoral strategies, fielding joint candidates, setting aside ideological differences, etc. That has started to happen only recently in Russia.

What also matters is the *electoral culture*. The Turkish electorate is conscious of its power to change governments through elections and is unwilling to relinquish that privilege. After winning Ankara and Istanbul, the united opposition may — theoretically — repeat its success at the next parliamentary elections and even capture a majority of seats in the Grand National Assembly.

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Of course, the playing field in Turkey is skewed. Erdoğan controls state resources, major parts of the media, and, most importantly, the Supreme Election Council. He has demonstrated his ability to manipulate the electoral process through various means: e.g. the state of emergency during the 2017 constitutional referendum or the outbreak of war with the PKK during the November 2015 legislative elections. Vote rigging or removal of elected officials, e.g. mayors from the pro-Kurdish HDP, is part of the toolbox. But the regime has applied the same tactics much more sparingly in western Turkey.

## Implications for Europe

Turkey is not likely to consolidate as an autocratic system, even though such an outcome cannot be dismissed altogether. Putinism, a product of conditions specific to Russia, is hardly a blueprint either. That does not imply that, in contrast to Turkey, the Russian polity is destined to remain authoritarian. On the contrary, factors such as a highly educated population, a large middle class, as well as the rising intolerance to corruption and state capture may favour democratic development over the long term. But what it does suggest is that the similarities Russia and Turkey exhibit are emblematic of all authoritarian or hybrid regimes, rather than a result of Erdoğan borrowing from Putin.

These differences bring into question the argument that Turkey and Russia constitute an autocratic bloc. Elites in both countries tend to espouse strong anti-hegemonic instincts, believe in state strength, and often resort to nationalism and religious conservatism to draw a line against the West. However, Russia as well as Turkey have proven flexible in their day-to-day conducting of foreign policy. Recently, for instance, Moscow sought US mediation in its oil price

dispute with Saudi Arabia. Turkey found itself seeking loans or swap deals from the US and UK and hinted at freezing the deployment of the S-400 air defence system.

Nevertheless, the EU must take a long-term view and recognise that the next few years are critical for Turkey's ailing democracy. Although Russia will remain authoritarian for some time to come, Turkey is approaching a historic crossroad: Either authoritarianism will be consolidated or some sort of return to parliamentary democracy will prevail. Hence, the EU should strongly support pro-democracy forces in Turkey by increasing its support for civil society, intellectuals, and the remaining independent media. The Union should continue to make critical issues such as the customs union upgrade, visa liberalisation, and financial support for Syrian refugees conditional on concrete steps towards democratisation. European decision-makers must look beyond the nativist populism of Erdoğan and recognise that a considerable part of the country no longer supports an executive presidency, but rather prefers a return to parliamentary democracy.

European support for Turkish democracy matters. Such support should not be only at the discourse level, but must be augmented by concrete measures to support pro-democracy forces in Turkey. The next few years will determine the outcome of the drawn-out struggle for the soul of Turkey. Hence, it is critical to understand the gravity of the current time frame and take a pro-active stance in favour of Turkish democracy.

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